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ABSTRACT

Effective administrative decisions result from the continuous and systematic appraisal of past decisions and of current conditions. Forty observations that may guide secondary school administrators in assessing and improving the effectiveness of their own decision-making processes are presented in this publication. Each observation is accompanied by a question that administrators can ask themselves about their own methods. The observations address such topic areas as the attitudes to be adopted toward decisions, the involvement of others in decision-making, assessment of the environmental factors that could affect the decision, the elements of careful planning, and demonstrations of leadership. (PGD)

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Decisions

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PERSPECTIVES FOR THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

EA 018 882

By Robert Maidment

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Decisions

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National Association of Secondary School Principals
Reston, Virginia

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Dedication

To those decisionmakers who continuously enhance the quality of life in schools.

About the Author

Robert Maidment is a professor of educational administration at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. His work experience includes a decade of elementary and secondary principalships in Virginia and Illinois. Maidment is co-editor of *Criticism, Conflict, & Change*, co-author of *Simulation Games—Design and Implementation*, and author of *Robert's Rules of Disorder—A Guide to Mismanagement, Straight Talk—A Guide to Saying More with Less*, and *Tuning In—A Guide to Effective Listening*.

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Preface

Only secondary principals can fully comprehend the staggering number of decisions they make in a typical day. While others might make decisions involving life-threatening situations, we challenge anyone to identify professionals who make more decisions that are *life-enhancing* than school principals. In fact, name any professional—from architect to zoologist—who engages daily in such a diverse array of interactions as the principal.

Obviously, it's the *quality* of those decisions that counts. To help principals and others here is a small collection of perspectives about the decision-making process that is familiar to us in practice but elusive in permanence. It is written in a "point and probe" format—a short observation followed by a key question. Quality decisions result from a continuous and systematic appraisal of the ones we've already made and from an analysis of the present conditions prompting the ones we're about to make.

Perspective No. 1
View Decisions as Investments

Point

One of America's most carefully guarded secrets is that most of our eligible adolescent population voluntarily attends and receives something of value for nearly 200 days yearly in a place called school. And most of the time what is designed to occur there, does. That this apparently non-newsworthy event occurs at all is a tribute to the decisionmakers—the administrators, teachers, counselors, department chairs, and others—who, individually and collectively, decide why and how the precious minutes and hours of a school day are invested. It's an awesome responsibility, since the quality of these decisions determines, to no small degree, the quality of life in America.

Probe

☐ Do I acknowledge the investment potential of school-based decisions?

Perspective No. 2
Sense the Scope

Point

We can easily succumb to the notion that our decisions are predetermined by ever-present forces—state departments, school boards, court systems, legislative bodies, and accrediting agencies—and further dominated by less tangible variables—philosophy, tradition, and research. These "influencers," however powerful, simply set the policies, priorities, and parameters that guide school operations.

The most important school-based decisions, however, determine how and when what is taught to whom. The responsibility for these decisions rightfully belongs to building administrators. Assuming that operational practices are consistent with current policies, the range of options is indeed impressive.

Probe

☐ Do I sense the extraordinary latitude I have in determining internal practices consistent with external policies?

Perspective No. 3
Search for Opportunities

Point

Decisions resulting from bandwagon addiction (Everybody else is doing it), whimsical urge (I want to because I want to), or administrative tinkering (Let's try it, anyway) are usually suspect. We all recall decisions based more upon a persuasive testimonial than upon tangible evidence. Why do we fall prey to these specious approaches? Part of the blame rests with accepting the pragmatic but faulty equation, Change equals Good. Change for its own sake seldom yields anything of value.

A more defensible equation? Change equals an opportunity to improve interpersonal relationships and educational services. The key word, of course, is *opportunity.* And that's a guarantee that can never be denied to principals.

Probe

☐ Do I view each decision as an opportunity to improve interpersonal relationships and educational services?

Perspective No. 4
Take a Detached View

Point

Occasionally, we become entangled in a decision-making struggle. We're inundated by conflicting advice and competing interests. To protect our flanks we tend to reinforce our own position.

Another tactic? Intellectually withdraw from the fray and become temporarily "detached." Then, by carefully analyzing the issue from every adversarial position, as if *you* were its champion, you may extract insightful views. This detachment permits an objective mix-and-match of ideas leading toward closure.

Probe

☐ Can I make a detached analysis amid competing interests and conflicting advice?

Perspective No. 5
Gather Relevant Data

Point

Good decisions are a product of accurate and complete information. Alerting staff members to potential issues, both real and perceived, enhances the flow of useful data. Then, once an issue is clearly defined, we determine with some precision what additional information is needed and select an efficient method of collecting it. As the decision becomes final, few surprises remain for those affected. We've also increased the willingness of staff members to respond favorably to future requests for information.

Probe

- ☐ Do I ensure a continuing flow of accurate and complete data?

Perspective No. 6
Exorcise Self-Imposed Constraints

Point

We may fail to fulfill personal and professional goals because of self-imposed constraints. Roadblocks are erected anytime we say, "We tried that before. It didn't work then and it won't work now." Or, "Others will never buy it." Or, "It's never been tried before." Or, "It might work there, but it hasn't a chance here." Or, "It's impossible."

Sound familiar? Such laments cripple the decision-making process more frequently than do rigid policy and budget constraints. At least they're *not* self-imposed.

Probe

☐ Do I allow restrictive thinking to adversely affect my decisions?

Perspective No. 7
Question Prior Decisions

Point

The impact of prior decisions can be overwhelming. We're naturally reluctant to change accepted notions about learning. For example, we've carefully justified and preserved the sequential offerings of biology, chemistry, and physics. But these subjects were originally added to the curriculum solely on *alphabetical* happenstance! While the early decisionmakers might well have been omnipotent, they weren't always omniscient. Educational decisions are, at best, perpetually tentative. A trend is not a destiny.

Probe

☐ Am I occasionally willing to question seriously some basic notions about schooling?

Perspective No. 8
Avoid Decision by Default

Point

It is impossible to avoid making decisions. Even *not* deciding an issue is a decision. While a conscious non-decision may be correct, there is a major distinction between deliberately withholding a decision and doing so unknowingly. We should assess the consequences of a non-decision just as carefully as we would an actual decision.

Probe

☐ When I elect not to decide an issue, do I act purposefully?

Perspective No. 9
Generalize with Caution

Point

Generalizing is risky. A decision is easily influenced if a certain action consistently yields a predictable result. At best, however, that result was more likely than it was certain. (Recall that venerable truisms about falling objects are being refuted.) Decisionmakers should distinguish the probable from the inevitable. They should know that all behavioral generalizations are false. Except *that* one. It's true.

Probe

☐ Do I mentally "test" all generalizations?

Perspective No. 10
Respect Inventiveness

Point

Imagination can be an important ingredient of decision making. When inundated by complaints of inadequate elevator service, the owner of a high-rise office building installed full-length mirrors beside the elevator doors. Substituting vanity for impatience was a low-cost, divergent solution.

While most of our decisions don't embrace such inventiveness, many do. Imagination is intelligence at play; give logical thinking an occasional recess.

Probe

☐ Have I carefully explored the potential for imaginative solutions?

Perspective No. 11
Involve the Staff

Point

While some decisions are better made by leaders, other decisions should include input by followers. Knowing the difference is a hallmark of an effective manager.

For routine matters administrative fiat can be crisper, quicker, cheaper, and better. Conversely, when any decision involves staff working conditions, a more collaborative approach is preferable. Genuine involvement between the leader and the led generally increases the acceptability of any decision. You can count on it—even if your decision would have been identical to their decision.

Probe

☐ Am I willing for staff members to become meaningfully involved in those decisions that will directly affect them?

Perspective No. 12
Share the Credit

Point

Acknowledging staff effort in forging a group decision is essential. Positive strokes are due those who invested time, talent, and energy in the process. Not so obvious is the need to cite the group's contribution in the presence of colleagues. While it might not appear entirely fair to credit others for successful decisions and personally accept blame for the failures, that's precisely how effective leaders get that way. And get *their* way.

Probe

☐ Do I carefully and consistently acknowledge staff contributions to the decision-making process?

Perspective No. 13
Ponder the Ripples

Point

Most decisions directly and exclusively affect those involved. Some decisions, however, can produce an adverse, indirect effect. A school board in an egalitarian mood once banished class rankings. That year college acceptance for scores of seniors was delayed while admissions officials awaited the "missing" class standings. This ripple effect could have been easily predicted. An awareness of indirect consequences will usually enhance the quality of decisions.

Probe

☐ Before making a decision, do I carefully consider the possible indirect consequences?

Perspective No. 14
Determine an Appropriate Rationale

Point

If the rationale for implementing a plan that is successful in one environment is altered, failure can result even in a similar environment. Curriculum planners in one city envision the entire community as a learning center, thus freeing selected students to work and study in diverse settings. Administrators in a similar urban setting view the plan as a way to delay school construction. For every two dozen farmed-out pupils, they reason, a classroom is saved. The plan flourishes in the first city. It flounders in the second. Surprised?

Probe

☐ Do I support an apparently correct decision for the wrong reason?

Perspective No. 15
Accept Conflicting Data

Point

The Selective Exposure Tendency suggests that we all sometimes seek data to confirm what we already believe. Most of us will readily admit it. The flip side is that we may actively *avoid* data that might conflict with what we already believe. Now, who among us will admit to doing *that*? Since all of us do this frequently while denying that we do, the tendency continues.

Probe

☐ Do I actively seek data that might conflict with what I already believe?

Perspective No. 16
Synergize with Care

Point

Synergy is a delightful concept. One plus one equals two plus. A basic tenet of team management is that a collective decision carefully made by key staff members having divergent views is preferable to a decision made independently. Sometimes.

Powerful variables can offset the equation, since not every issue lends itself to "groupthink." Dominant personalities can adversely affect an outcome, and well-intentioned team members can make collective errors in judgment.

When the process works, the equation prevails. When it doesn't, one plus one can equal a major headache.

Probe

☐ Do I carefully select issues for group decisions, and do I have an appropriate group to decide them?

Perspective No. 17
Apply Planning Tools

Point

Although we can't predict our future, we can invent it. Long-range planning decisions, however, require an intensive investment of time, talent, and energy. Decision-tree approaches, force-field models, and Delphi techniques are among the planning tools used to facilitate the decision-making process. Appropriately applied, such tools can often conserve both time and energy. The talent dimension is still required.

Probe

☐ Do I know how and when to apply various planning tools as an aid to decision making?

Perspective No. 18
Keep Cool

Point

Decisions influenced by an elevated emotional tone are often regretted. A scathing, scattergun memo about missed deadlines will offend the dutiful and, since the blame is diluted, comfort the guilty. Worse, staff members will mentally record the loss of objectivity.

A few managers we know vent their hostility on paper, shred the poison penmanship, and then, once the emotional temperature drops, take a more controlled, positive action. Emotionally healthy leaders last longer.

Probe

- ☐ Do I avoid making decisions while feeling angry or hostile?

Perspective No. 19
Time It Right

Point

The timing of decisions can directly abet or erode their effect. How then, you ask, does a leader learn *when* to decide what? From graduate studies and independent readings? Hardly. From divine guidance? Some swear by it. From intelligence? Perhaps, if we selected our grandparents wisely.

In most cases, we learn timing from making countless decisions and storing the ill-timed ones in our memory banks. Plus a bit of intuition, some shrewd guessing, fancy footwork, and luck.

Probe

☐ Prior to announcing an important decision do I consider the effects of its timing?

Perspective No. 20
Do the Critical

Point

While the timing of a decision is important, *having* sufficient time to make it is critical. Time management specialists generally agree that we should:

- Disregard the trivial
- Delay the unimportant
- Delegate the routine
- Do the critical.

Once priorities are determined, we should focus upon activities that can make a difference. When our priorities are out of sync with those set by others, there will always be someone to remind us that something delayed or disregarded is now crucial.

Probe

☐ Do I consistently assign a higher priority to those issues that are operationally critical?

Perspective No. 21
Trust Genuine Intelligence

Point

Machines don't make decisions, people do. If both problem causes and potential solutions are known, it makes sense to rely upon electronic wizardry. Even if solutions are unknown, artificial intelligence can generate impressive data. But it is people who actively initiate a plan while the machine passively awaits another entry.

Probe

- ☐ Do I acknowledge both the merits and limitations of computers in the decision-making process?

Perspective No. 22
Be Venturesome

Point

We've underscored deliberative decision making. How about the hunch player? Is there ever a time for guesswork? Occasionally, yes! Even this decision, however, often derives from reasonable and relatively risk-free perceptions. While a trial-and-error approach suggests, "Let's see if it will work," an educated guess approach suggests, "It's likely to work, let's try it." A degree of venturesomeness can displace inertia.

Probe

☐ Do I occasionally advance a decision based primarily upon an educated hunch?

Perspective No. 23
Define Your Terms

Point

Ask a group of principals to define differentiated staffing or modular scheduling. You are likely to hear differing interpretations. If we are somewhat imprecise using our own lexicon, imagine the problem confronting our publics. For example, educators typically define goals as long range and objectives as short range. But the rest of the world usually *reverses* these terms.

It's not a question of being right; it's one of being understood. If you're selling long-range decisions to the public as goals, it's wise to first acknowledge the distinction.

Probe

☐ When interpreting a decision to others, do I carefully define the key words?

Perspective No. 24
Tell and Sell

Point

Many decisions reflect both ends and means—the something to be done and the somehow to do it. Telling a staff member what you want accomplished and providing him or her with the appropriate responsibility and authority along with the needed resources to perform a task might not yield the desired results.

Telling is not selling. The missing ingredient? Satisfaction—understanding and accepting the initial decision plus being willing to execute the task competently. When this satisfaction level is high, the "something" usually gets done—somehow.

Probe

☐ Whenever possible, do I make certain that I've fully "sold" my decision to the person expected to execute it?

Perspective No. 25
Create Enabling Conditions

Point

Can we ensure quality staff decisions in advance? We can't ensure but we can enhance. Five questions, answered affirmatively, could make a difference. Do those empowered to make a decision possess the appropriate skills, attitudes, and insights? Is the specific problem perceived as meaningful by staff members? Will the group be provided the needed resources to perform effectively? Are the logistics (group size, meeting times, and locations) acceptable to the group? Are you more likely than not to accept and act favorably upon the group decision? These conditions *could* make a difference.

Probe

- ☐ In empowering staff members to render a decision have I created enabling conditions for them?

Perspective No. 26
Assess the Positive

Point

Periodically, administrative teams assess the quality of their decisions. A typical opening salvo: "Let's list some of the problems we've had in reaching consensus on important issues." As the list grows, participants sense how they contributed more to problems and less to solutions. And, predictably, consensus is averted again.

As an alternative approach the leader might ask, "What recent decisions have yielded positive results?" Then ask, "What was it about these decisions that enabled them to work?" By analyzing successes the group reinforces positive behavior.

Probe

☐ Do I periodically assess our decision-making processes with key staff members?

Perspective No. 27
Enjoy the Process

Point

For some administrators, making decisions is highly stressful. For them, situations that require decisions are to be avoided, ignored, or suppressed. Fortunately, most leaders view each pending decision as an issue to be resolved, an invitation to stretch, a relationship to be enhanced, or an activity to be improved.

To them a decision is a challenge. Decisions represent opportunities for action, and for the most part, they are fun to make. Since continuous decision making comes with the territory, why not enjoy the process?

Probe

☐ Do I personally enjoy my role as a decision-maker?

Perspective No. 28
Invest with Caution

Point

Money fuels the educational enterprise. Many decisions affect how we raise, spend, save, invest, and on a few regrettable occasions, waste fiscal resources. We can reasonably question any decision if its predicted economic consequence is disproportionate to its potential worth. Even worse, perhaps, is initially investing in an activity having known worth and then managing it in a way that subverts its potential.

Probe

- ☐ Do I view expenditures in terms of potential worth?

Perspective No. 29
Enhance the Trust

Point

One noteworthy managerial formula suggests that trust plus control equals a constant sum. Exert tighter control over a subordinate and exact a diminished perception of trust. Conversely, loosening the control usually enhances the level of perceived trust. We can learn to generally loosen control over mature employees and selectively tighten control only when justified. It's called "simultaneous loose-tight control." And, since trust equals awareness plus openness plus risk, the implications for effective decision making are clear.

Probe

☐ Do I generally and genuinely trust subordinates to work independently with a minimum of control?

Perspective No. 30
Capitalize upon the Unexpected

Point

The mythical princes of Serendip had an aptitude for accidentally discovering things of value. Such unexpected benefits may also result once decisions are implemented. Recall, for example, when urban students intentionally dropped out of school to become eligible for newly formed "storefront" centers. Obviously, the alternative school wasn't designed to attract those currently enrolled in traditional settings.

The "serendipity" factor enabled many principals to adopt or adapt some alternative patterns and thus upgrade the status of many potential dropouts from zero to hero.

Probe

☐ Do I sense and act upon opportunities flowing from the impact of recent decisions?

Perspective No. 31
Plan for Contingencies

Point

Having Plan B ready should Plan A fail often separates the expert from the marginal manager. Call it back-up, redundancy, contingency, or, perhaps more accurately, good sense. Not every plan is fail-safe.

From planning an opening-day assembly to selecting a commencement speaker, the question should be, "What if. . .?" Although unexpected "what ifs" crop up periodically, we're secure in knowing that we've accounted for the reasonably predictable ones. Failing to plan is planning to fail.

Probe

☐ Have I systematically prepared appropriate back-up strategies?

Perspective No. 32
Ease the Impact

Point

How does one soften the impact of unpopular decisions? There is, of course, a natural reluctance to accept change simply because it is perceived as different, disruptive, or destructive. The pain of change often can be eased by releasing trial balloons before the announced decision. Selectively plant speculations such as, "Did you know that there is some thought being given to. . .?"

Now await the discontent. Carefully weigh each reaction and then design tactics for answering individual criticisms and a strategy for gaining general acceptance. After the fact, staff members can say, "The principal at least listened to me," or "I gave my advice *before* the anouncement!"

Probe

☐ Do I determine how a decision will be received before it becomes official?

Perspective No. 33
Challenge Traditional Logic

Point

Logic plus tradition combine as profound decision influencers. Why do we build classrooms, for example, for 30 students and one teacher? Two centuries ago someone determined that five rows of six pupils was about right—the seventh couldn't see the blackboard clearly. And room width? Well, ceiling heights permitted natural sunlight to extend just so far. Logical? Yes. Traditional? Absolutely! Now, cite *one* research study that proves the 30, or 25, or whatever-to-one ratio is ideal for learning. So much for traditional logic.

Probe

☐ Am I willing to ask occasionally *why* we do whatever we're doing?

Perspective No. 34
Appraise Objectively

Point

Teacher evaluations represent very important decision opportunities for principals. The leniency-strictness factor, for example, is crucial in all appraisal decisions. A "halo effect" occurs when the rater assigns high value to all items on a scale, although exemplary performance is known to satisfy only a few. A central tendency effect occurs when the rater, often to avoid documenting either exemplary or marginal performance, leans toward average rankings. Another example of "uneven consistency" occurs when uniformly strict ratings are applied indiscriminately. An awareness of these tendencies plus a willingness to avoid them strengthens the appraisal system. It's called rater credibility.

Probe

☐ Do I carefully avoid common appraisal errors?

Perspective No. 35
Strive for Effectiveness

Point

The classic distinction between efficient and effective is the difference between doing the job right and doing the right job. The effective manager survives. The efficient one works on borrowed time. The leader who is a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" not only endures but also prevails. Ideal decisions consistently enhance the educational mission while diminishing the non-essential overburden of those who perform it.

Probe

- [ ] In my quest for efficiency do I ever compromise my effectiveness?

Perspective No. 36
Exude Confidence

Point

Leader behavior following a decision is crucial. Perceptions of confidence, commitment, courage, and competence, however intangible, assist others to accept a decision. Research on the self-fulfilling prophecy—that "you-get-what-you-see" phenomenon—is admittedly suspect. The leader who exudes an "It's going to work" attitude, however, seems to have a higher rate of decision acceptance than does a gloom-and-doom colleague taking a similar action.

Probe

☐ Does my behavior suggest that I genuinely believe a particular decision is worthy, worthwhile, and workable?

Perspective No. 37
Seek Legitimate Criticism

Point

When a decision causes noticeable change, a leader can expect—and should encourage—legitimate resistance. The key word is "legitimate," for unbridled criticism is no more defensible than capricious change. Failure to seek constructive feedback following a major decision reveals both ignorance and apathy. Once a decision is executed, careful monitoring through feedback allows for systematic and continuous refinement. If we don't know where we're going, we won't know how or when we arrive.

Probe

☐ Are several avenues open for others to express legitimate resistance to my decision?

Perspective No. 38
Go with What You've Got

Point

Usually, we don't decide anything without an initial "get smart" phase. But when did we last possess *all* the information we wanted prior to the decision? If we delay, linger, and await every bit of desirable data, perhaps the optimum moment for the decision will be irrevocably lost.

Our best shot is to go with what we've got. While "winging it" sounds a bit capricious, shelving an almost ready but needed decision sounds a bit inept.

Probe

☐ Do I occasionally delay unnecessarily a needed decision?

Perspective No. 39
Visualize the Impact

Point

When visualizing the impact of a pending decision, we often mentally run it through a best and worst-case scenario. We ask, what's the worst thing that could happen? Then, we reflect, if such a dire consequence is possible, perhaps we should regroup and start anew. The problem is that we've allowed an imagined response to a non-action to deter us. Seldom does a worst-case scenario prevail. The *best* case doesn't fare any better. But the range of the in-between responses is always favorable. Anything is better than the worst.

Probe

☐ Do I visualize the impact of my decisions in a realistic manner?

Perspective No. 40
Prepare for the Next One

Point

In the process of making decisions there are no "WIN" buttons to earn. If there were, one could legitimately wear the button upside-down to read "NIM"—No Instant Miracles. Neither are there easy victories nor permanent defeats. When certain factors are clearly present—objectivity, relevancy, timeliness, caution, openness, risk, trust—any decision is more likely to yield positive results than when one or more of these factors are absent.

Decisions are not inherently right or wrong, good or bad. However, some are better than others! And while a situation might appear hopeless, it probably isn't serious. Besides, another decision awaits us as we create our future by design and not by default.

Probe

- ☐ Have I taken all reasonable and responsible actions to ensure that a decision has every chance to succeed?